

CONSERVATION COMMISSION GRANT PROGRAM CLOSE OUT PROCESS “How Are We Doing?”

Compiled 9/1/05

BACKGROUND:

As part of the formal grant close out process, we ask conservation districts to provide us with input / comments about the overall Commission Grants Program. We are interested in knowing what we can do to make the various programs work better for districts; correct mistakes, clarify confusing instructions, and generally make the forms, instructions, procedures and policies better; while at the same time meet legal requirements established by the Legislature, follow program policy and procedures established by the Commission, and keep policies, procedures and forms consistent.

COMMENTS RECEIVED:

1. I think you guys are going great and it is a pleasure to work with such a group of professionals. You are all very helpful and always willing to work with me if I need any assistance. I appreciate the reminders that are emailed out about reports and etc. Again, a great job.
2. The Commission is doing an excellent job in administering grants.
3. We have had nothing but outstanding assistance and guidance from our grant coordinators. Every question we had was handled quickly and professionally. The even took the extra time to make sure we understood how to use forms we hadn't used before. We went through personnel change, so most of the corporate knowledge in doing vouchering was lost. Grant staff was extremely helpful in getting us on course to submit these requests on a consistent basis.

The advent of the Cost Share Partial Payment form was a blessing while working with landowners; not requiring them to spend the total amount of the project up front, but to do the project in phases and to get reimbursed after each phase.

The current Cost Share Worksheet is not user friendly, I tried to create my own version because it's a tool not a form. Kristy McGuill sent me one she had made and it was a lot easier to use. It's help like this we received that makes working with the Commission enjoyable.

NOTE: BASED ON THIS DISTRICT'S COMMENTS, WE HAVE TOTALLY RE-VAMPED THE COST SHARE WORKSHEET TO MAKE IT MUCH SIMPLER TO USE.

4. The Foster Creek Conservation District has been pleased with the overall grants program at the Commission. We have enjoyed a good working relationship with Debbie and Cheryl. We will miss Debbie greatly when she retires. Whenever we have had questions, the grants staff has been there to answer them. We greatly appreciate all their efforts in working with the districts.

The only thing that could be improved on is the communication between the grants and field staff. We have found that not always is the information we get consistent, and this tends to create confusion.

5. One area that I would see helpful from the Commission is to have a thorough training between district and grants staff; go through the entire process beginning with the grant writing, tasks, budget breakdown, completing the vouchers and reporting system, to the final close out of each grant.

I have been with the district for six years and I still get confused – although part of that may be me! Maybe you already do this and I have missed out on the information. I am not sure. I do remember a meeting that we had many years ago. I believe in Ritzville, that we went through finances with the state auditor. This was very informative; and because we could ask questions along the way, I left like I understood things better.

Most district staff wear many hats in the district. Because of this, this kind of training, in my opinion, needs to be by itself, not done during WADE. There are always too many things that staff needs to choose from there.

Thanks for asking the question.

NOTE: IT IS MY INTENTION TO CONDUCT SMALL, REGIONAL, INFORMAL GRANT-RELATED TRAININGS THIS BIENNIUM TO TALK ABOUT JUST THESE KINDS OF ISSUES.

6. As always, CC grant staff has been great to work with.

Only one issue arose that needed clarifying and that was the percentage of cost share that could be paid to dairy producers under the WQ Implementation grant. Grays Harbor CD read the Grants Administrative Procedures Manual differently than grant staff did, but it was worked out.

7. Grants staff are very helpful – we're always able to work through problems together. Tedious little errors, often 1¢ due to rounding, can be more trouble than they seem to be worth, especially considering the copying, mailing and postage costs for a 1¢ corrected voucher. I understand the need for accurate accounting, though.

We are using template spreadsheets developed several years ago. Most have been modified to include formulas and links; however, I don't know which spreadsheets actually need to be submitted as part of each voucher and which ones are for our own use! Would appreciate a clean set of spreadsheets so we can be sure we have

what is required and aren't just building on old stuff. It would be great if you could direct me to electronic versions of these spreadsheets.

NOTE: THE GRANT ASSISTANT RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS DISTRICT HAS RESPONDED TO THIS REQUEST.

8. Your staff has been great; very friendly, helpful and quick to help.
9. Your staff, especially Kristy and Cheryl (whom we deal with the most), always conduct business in a professional and helpful manner. We appreciate all the work you do and understand that when JLARC mandate change, you have no choice but to comply and drag us along for the ride, kicking, whining and screaming. I do not like change just for the sake of change. I do not like what appears to be additional unnecessary administration and paperwork. I probably would have quit out of frustration long ago were it not for the patience and positive attitude of the current Commission staff and the assistance they've provided to us in navigating the myriad of changes.

Regarding the grant forms and reports, here's my two cents. The reporting process has improved dramatically. The current reporting process, in my opinion, communicates the right information to the right people, it occurs at the right frequency and most importantly does not place an undue administrative burden on us. The vouchering process has improved in its consistency, but the detail page has become a nightmare. Project activity reporting is easy enough at the ultimate/intermediate outcome level. However, the financial end is made more cumbersome by having to split the budget out by outcome. Instead of just tracking salaries, travel, overhead, etc, we now have to split each budget category by the number of outcomes. This makes for a difficult time, especially if we have multiple outcomes. I would suggest looking at what Ecology does. Ecology allows grant recipients to choose whether they want to track the budget and voucher at the outcome or budget element level. Tracking at the budget element (i.e. budget, travel, etc) has worked out better for those of us with multiple grant budgets to track and no full time bookkeeper to keep it all straight.

I think I've explained this well enough, but I've probably just managed to confuse you. So please feel free to call with any questions. At the very least I wanted to communicate that despite all the inconveniences, we continue to appreciate our Commission staff partners who are obviously working hard to help our district stay in business and get conservation on the ground.

NOTE: IN ORDER TO INCORPORATE JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS AND MAINTAIN CONTINUITY ACROSS PROGRAMS, WE TRANSITIONED TO OUTCOME BASED GRANT PROGRAMS THIS BIENNIUM. ALL COMMISSION GRANT PROGRAMS ARE BEING TRACKED AND ACCOUNTED FOR AT THE OUTCOME LEVEL. THIS METHODOLOGY REQUIRES THE CD TO TIE ALL GRANT RELATED EXPENDITURES TO ITS RESPECTIVE OUTCOME, AND RESULTS IN THE CD BEING ABLE TO IDENTIFY THE ACTUAL COST FOR DELIVERING THE OUTCOME.